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A child of the frontier

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APPLETON SHORT PLAYS

N^o7

A CHILD OF
THE FRONTIER

A One Act Play
About
Abraham Lincoln

BY

ELMA E. LEVINGER

D. APPLETON & COMPANY

NEW YORK



LONDON

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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK

APPLETON SHORT PLAYS

No. 7

A CHILD OF THE FRONTIER

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A ONE ACT PLAY ABOUT
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

BY

ELMA E. LEVINGER



D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK :: 1925 :: LONDON

NOTE TO THE PRODUCER: Under no circumstances should the advance publicity or the program contain a hint that the play is woven about the birth of Lincoln, otherwise the dramatic surprise at the end would be destroyed.

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"A Child of the Frontier," by Elma E. Levinger, was awarded first place in the national contest of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and recommended by their Committee on Literature for production in all its federated bodies.

A CHILD OF THE FRONTIER

A ONE-ACT PLAY ABOUT ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHARACTERS

(In the order in which they appear)

AUNT SALLY, *the grannywoman*

NANCY, *a young mother*

KATE, *Aunt Sally's daughter*

NANCY'S NEW-BORN SON

TIME: *The early part of the nineteenth century.*

PLACE: *The undeveloped Western territory.*

The room is the only one in the log dwelling; there is a single uncurtained window in the rear wall with greased paper for a pane; on the door, a little to the right of it, hangs a deerskin. A huge fireplace formed by the chimney-nook is in the right wall; above it a few pans, several pots and a skillet, between the fireplace and back wall a spinning wheel. Before the window, also before the low-burning fire, two three-legged stools; in the angle made by the left corner, a bedstead made of poles stuck between the logs, the "foot" supported by a crotched stick driven into the dirt floor. Along the left wall a table made from a huge hewn log standing on four legs; on one corner a few tin and pewter dishes.

Above the fire on a sort of crane hangs a huge black kettle. It is steaming and the WOMAN standing be-

fore it prods the white clothes hanging from it with a long stick. She wears a skirt of deerskin, a worn knit shawl and soft moccasin-like shoes, made of skin. Her scant hair is just touched with gray. Her bowed shoulders are turned to the audience. She sings, as she works, that old hymn of Watts, with the weird intonations one often catches in the voice of the lonely woman of the farm or mountains. The curtain rises after the first four lines.

AUNT SALLY

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.

(Her voice dies away; she gives an extra vicious punch with her stick. The figure lying beneath the faded pink "kiverlid" across the bed stirs.)

VOICE FROM THE BED

Aunt Sally!

(AUNT SALLY turns and goes toward the bed with a shuffling tread. Her hard life has left her face stern and rugged, her eyes are dull. When she speaks it is in the peculiar lifeless tone of the woman who seldom hears human speech.)

AUNT SALLY

Had a good sleep?

(She raises the patient a trifle upon the pillow. NANCY is a beautiful woman of about twenty-six. Although still pale and worn from her ordeal she has such radiant eyes that she seems almost vigorous; her long black hair falls in confusion over her coarse gown. Her voice, in its low refinement, is in great contrast with AUNT SALLY'S slovenly speech.)

NANCY

Yes. *(Glancing toward the door.)* Hasn't my man come back yet?

AUNT SALLY

No. Snow's powerful deep. He's been down working on Hodgin's barn, ain't he?

NANCY

Maybe it was just as good he was away when the baby came—you don't need a man around then.

AUNT SALLY

I've been grannywoman for nigh twenty years; I brought so many babies I've 'bout lost track of 'em. I know what I'm saying. If men had to do the child bearing, the human race would go out quick—like a candle! They play jokes at weddings, a-carrying on and a-racing for the whisky bottle. But they ain't crying like the bride and her kin. The women folks know what she's got to look forward to. We know why we cry.

NANCY

I wouldn't have cried if I'd known I was going to have two lovely children so soon. *(Looking about a trifle anxiously.)* Where's my little Sarah?

AUNT SALLY

I sent her over yonder to stay with daughter Kate to have her out the way. (*Leaning over bed and picking up baby, wrapped in an old blanket.*) Lord, he's a spindly little thing, ain't he? An awfully unpromising baby.

NANCY

Give him a chance to grow, Aunt Sally. By the time he's a day old he'll be right handsome.

AUNT SALLY (*doubtfully*)

Maybe. But I was a grannywoman before you was born, and I've tended 'most every woman in the county these last twenty years or so. I know a weak baby when I sees one. Sometimes when you can't get 'em started breathing at first, them mites don't never live long. Reckon their hearts don't work right or something.

NANCY (*holding out her arms for the baby*)

You don't think—

AUNT SALLY (*putting the bundle in her arms*)

I don't know much for certain, and I've nursed plenty of babies in my time. Anyhow, the good Lord sends 'em fast—and He takes 'em fast when He's a mind to. We folks ain't got nothing to say about it. (*Walks toward the kettle.*) Guess I'll get the clothes wrung.

NANCY

I just can't 'bide still and see you working so hard for me, Aunty.

AUNT SALLY

I'd feel right queer if I wasn't working. I was washing clothes for my own mother when my baby

sister was born, and me no more'n eight years old. And I've been working ever since. Like my mother. She didn't age much after she got 'round sixty—she just kept on getting more tired. (*Begins to hang clothes on line in front of fire.*) Can't hang 'em out—they'd freeze.

NANCY

It's the bad weather that makes my man slow getting home. (*With almost childish impatience.*) I want to show him the baby!

AUNT SALLY (*dryly*)

Guess he'll have plenty of chance to see him, 'specially when he gets big enough to be under his pa's feet all the time.

(*The door opens and KATE enters, a basket on one arm. She is about thirty, tall and full-bosomed, with great discontented eyes. Her shining black hair is wet with snow. Her voice is brusque, her manner sullen. She is dressed in a rough skin skirt and knitted kittle with a shaggy fur coat she throws off as she enters.*)

KATE

Think I was never coming, ma? (*With a nod toward the bed.*) How's the new baby, Nan?

(*She goes to table, takes bread and cakes from her basket. Now she comes to the bed for a look at the baby.*)

NANCY

How's my little Sarah?

KATE (*snapping*)

Crying to come home. What can you expect of a young one two years old! Pity you couldn't have rested a spell 'fore the second one come.

NANCY

I'm powerful glad to get him, Kate!

KATE (*drawing the stool closer to fire and spreading out her wet skirt to dry*)

You just wait, Nancy, till you're married twelve years like me instead of just three. Wait till you get five babies in a row, and one of 'em so crippled up you're almost ashamed of him yourself. You wait!

NANCY

You'll have an easier time when the babies get a little older.

AUNT SALLY (*back at her washing*)

When the babies gets older, her troubles 'll just begin. Like mine. She talks about having five children. Women nowadays are scairt of hurting themselves and want to take life easy. (*With simple pride.*) I had twelve—four of 'em living yet. I thought when they was little babies was the hard time. Up 'fore dawn to give 'em suck and all day washing and fretting for 'em and up with 'em half the night. I thought it was hard then. But them was the easy times. Now Kate's the only one that's a mite of comfort to me; the boys running wild and you know what my 'Liza done. It ain't right we've got to go through as much with children and get nothing back for it. But what are we going to do about it?

KATE

Nothing. (*Turns to NANCY almost fiercely.*) Three years ago you had the grandest wedding for miles around. And now he won't never keep a roof over your head for a year straight. A smart girl like you slaving and carrying in wood just like the rest of us till your time was on you! (*To her mother.*) I told

you so, ma, when the teacher fellow stayed down the Hollow and you wanted me to go to him with Georgie and learn reading and writing. It don't pay to get learning. Nancy here's got it—she can read and write and everything—and what's it brought her?

NANCY

I'm glad I know a little. I can learn the children something when they're older, 'specially the boy. I'm not complaining about my man. He's a steady worker—most of the time—and he don't drink overmuch generally. But I want this baby to go ahead of his father. His daddy can't do more'n write his name, and I had to teach him that much. But my baby's going to have learning. He's going to be a lawyer, maybe, and if he gets enough learning, he might even get sent to the legislature.

KATE

That's likely! Such goings on don't happen to this neighborhood.

NANCY (*with pretty earnestness*)

You can't always say. Maybe he'll grow up like my aunt's cousin and be a preacher.

KATE (*scornfully*)

Like Elder Cameron! He's in the saddle on the circuit till he's ready to drop. He's lucky at the end of the year if he gets enough potatoes and corn meal for his wife and children, and, maybe, fifty dollars—if he can collect it. And you can't expect your boy to grow up a regular sort of preacher, can you?

NANCY (*wistfully*)

Don't you ever imagine lovely things are going to happen to your babies, Kate?

KATE (*shortly*)

No—'cause nothing good ain't never going to happen to me and mine. Suppose I made out my lame Jake was going to grow up a president or a general or something? That wouldn't make his crooked back straight, would it?

NANCY

No. But when I look at a little baby—even if it isn't my own—I can't help making plans. The babies have just come straight from God—they're still mighty nigh to Him. And when you look at them, you don't know what God wants them to be when they're grown up. If that woman who kept the inn had known Christ was going to be born that night, she wouldn't have turned Mary away. She'd given her the best room in the house and made a fire in the stove instead of sending her to the stable. Maybe that woman never knew the Savior was born in her barn; she looked at Him and He looked just like any other mite of a baby. But we've got no way of knowing—we can't dream far enough ahead.

KATE (*mystified, therefore irritated*)

That sort of talk don't mean nothing at all in the world to me. I never got religion.

NANCY (*half-laughing at her own boldness*)

You're going to laugh at me, Kate, but when I lay here last night, kinda cold and my troubles beginning, I kept thinking of what that circuit preacher said down at church last year—remember?

KATE (*shortly, rising to hang up a piece of wash her mother has overlooked*)

I don't take no stock in preachers, neither.

(*Sits down again, her back toward NANCY, while*

AUNT SALLY *shuffles to table and putters among the dishes a moment before listening to NANCY with pathetic interest.*)

NANCY (*musingly*)

He told so beautiful about Mary the mother of Jesus lying in a bare stable—not much better than this place, I reckon—with the wind blowing—and maybe snow, if they have snow in those far countries—and the winter stars shining through the holes in the roof—and the little baby sleeping warm and quiet beside her in the manger. A little baby—like mine! (*She holds the little bundle close to her heart, and it is a few minutes before she can continue.*) Mary knew beforehand from the angel He was going to save the whole world; but maybe before the rich kings got there with their presents, she didn't think much about it. His father was a carpenter like my man, and she wasn't thinking her baby would be a prince. She just thought He would be a good man, and some day everybody would love Him. Maybe He was just a weak, unpromising baby like mine, but she expected great things of Him. When we're young girls, I reckon we're all foolish and think we'll amount to something when we grow up. I know I did, with my learning and being the best spinner in the county and everything. And when the baby comes, you don't stop dreaming—but your dreams change. You feel just like Mary did with her baby in the manger. You dream there's a prince sleeping on your breast, and you dream of him doing all the things you thought you was going to do yourself.

AUNT SALLY (*wiping her eyes*)

You do talk just beautiful, Nan. Better than the preacher did.

KATE (*touched but scornful*)

It ain't hard to make grand plans while you're laying there on your back. Wait till he gets falling into the crick in summer and shooting himself up with his pa's shotgun. Maybe he won't be even healthy.

AUNT SALLY (*with another professional look at the baby*)

He looks mighty unpromising now. I've been granny-woman for everybody in this county for years and years, and I ought to know a trifling baby when I sees one. He was so sort of blue at first—they kind never lives long.

NANCY (*pluckily*)

My aunt's sister back in Virginia had a little boy who was like that, and he's living yet.

KATE

Humph—back in Virginia where your kin come from must have been 'bout the same as here: the only crop that never failed was babies. But it must be like playing to raise a family in them parts. Back in Virginia don't some folks live in a grand brick house just like a church? And have niggers to do their dirty work for 'em? That ain't like having children out here in the wilderness.

AUNT SALLY (*nodding*)

Kate's right! I been grannywoman in this county nigh to twenty years, and I've seen women lying in open-front shacks with the snow drifting in. I stood there wondering if I ought to wrap the mother or the naked baby in the only blanket they got. (*Simply, for it is an old story with her.*) And once when I come back, I found the new baby and the other two children and their ma all laying there in their blood

. . . Indians! Their pa was up the river a-trading. (*Shrugging it away.*) Life ain't easy here like back in Virginia.

KATE (*savagely*)

Easy! I ain't got no life of my own any more. Once or twice a year maybe I get away from home when there's a burying or a wedding. Or ride to the preaching with a baby perched up in front of me on the saddle—and another one strapped behind. And all the work ain't so bitter as the pains when they come— (*Suddenly her hard face contracts with agony.*) —but it ain't nothing like the pain they gives you when they die.

NANCY (*holding her own baby closer*)

Don't, Kate— It always hurts you to talk about it.

KATE (*sweeping on*)

One of them got hurt when I was hoeing corn and not looking after him right—the other died of mill-sickness. I had to let him lay, 'cause all the others was sick of it, too, and I didn't have hands enough. He'd cry to me for water, and I was too busy to fetch it to him. (*Wildly.*) Sometimes on still nights I hear him crying—and crying—and crying—and I can't never go to him now.

AUNT SALLY (*from her seat at foot of bed*)

Don't take on so, Kate. Us women all have gone through all them things, Kate. That's all done and finished.

KATE

The healthy ones that might have been some comfort to me died, but I've still got Jake with his crooked back, and his own father not wanting to feed him. Don't you go telling me the Lord knows His business.

When babies come so weak and puny they don't amount to much, we ought to just let 'em die off so we can look after the strong ones better.

NANCY (*with her first spark of anger*)

You haven't any right to talk wicked like that.

KATE (*sullenly*)

It ain't me that's wicked. We women don't get treated right but—(*Rising with a shrug.*)—It don't do no good talking about it. (*Going back toward bed.*) And I ain't seen the new baby since last night. (*Leaning over the young mother, tender in spite of herself.*) What're you going to name him?

NANCY (*busy pulling the blanket down from baby's face*)

I reckon— (*With a scream of terror.*) What's the matter with him? Aunt Sally—look!

AUNT SALLY (*taking child from her quickly*)

It looks like spasms—and bad.

NANCY (*frantic*)

That's what killed Anna's baby. What do you do for it? Do something—quick!

AUNT SALLY (*reflectively*)

There's that woman down by the crossroads they say can cure a child just by touching it—and she's got all kinds of herbs—

KATE

We can't wait so long—

NANCY (*turns to AUNT SALLY, wringing her hands in her helplessness*)

But *you* do something—

AUNT SALLY

There ain't much you do with spasms—

NANCY

You cured Abbie's little girl—

AUNT SALLY (*her slow-moving brain groping toward the light*)

Abbie's young one was older—and healthy.

NANCY

But do something—!

AUNT SALLY

I reckon I got her out of it by putting her in hot water— It sort of loosened her and— (*Thrusting her hand in kettle.*) The water's still hot in here. (*Turning to KATE, and going to fireplace with baby.*) Don't wait to take off its clothes—help me hold his head, Kate.

NANCY (*crying out in her agony*)

Let me help you—

AUNT SALLY (*with a curious look for her daughter, who has not moved*)

What are you waiting for, Kate? Help me hold him. You know my hands ain't none too steady no more.

KATE (*very low*)

Maybe we— (*Looks toward NANCY, with her head buried in the pillows and breaks off half-ashamed.*) What's the use of fussing over a baby like that?

AUNT SALLY (*in a horrified whisper*)

Are you crazy, Kate? You ain't going to let a little baby die?

KATE

It's better off dead, an unpromising baby like him. Maybe he won't be no better'n my lame Jake, when

he's growed. Maybe he won't be able to fend for himself.

AUNT SALLY (*busy removing the blanket*)

You got to help me, Kate, and rub life in him when we get him out the water. I've been a grannywoman for nigh twenty years, and I ain't ever give a baby up yet—and I ain't going to now.

KATE (*a world of concentrated bitterness in her low voice*)

If you'd thrown a blanket over my Jake's face when he was born, nobody'd be the wiser, and his crooked back wouldn't be breaking my heart every day of my life.

AUNT SALLY

I acted for the best. And now we got to do our best for them— (*Nodding toward the bed.*)—They're neighbors.

KATE (*bitterly*)

Then let it die. They're better off without another mouth to feed.

AUNT SALLY (*bending over tub*)

You come right here and help me, Kate. She ain't going to lose her baby if I can help it.

NANCY (*through her sobbing*)

Is he—gone? God, don't let him die—he's too little to die and go 'way off in the dark alone—let me take care of him for a while.

KATE (*squaring her shoulders and going to her mother*)

Let me hold his head—do you aim to drown him? (*Bends over kettle.*) Why don't you keep splashing him like you did Abbie's child?

NANCY

God—take me—
(*Hides her face again.*)

AUNT SALLY

Better take him out, Kate. I don't know if it did no good or not. Now we'll strip him and rub him good and wrap him in a hot blanket.

(*KATE sits on stool before fire, while her mother kneels beside her undressing the child in her lap.*)

NANCY (*in a stifled voice*)

Is he— (*She cannot bring herself to say "dead."*)
How does he look now?

KATE

Better.

NANCY

Are you sure you're doing all you can for my baby, Kate?

KATE (*harsh suspicion in her voice as she continues rubbing*)

What do you mean?

NANCY

You were so slow at first—and you know what you said about weak babies—
(*Stops, confused.*)

KATE (*affecting indifference*)

What are you talking about?

NANCY (*hysterically*)

You said folks ought to let weak little babies die—
but you didn't mean it, Kate—say you didn't mean it!

KATE

Yes—I meant it.

NANCY (*frantic*)

Then you're not trying to help him! You're going to let him die.

(*She half rises and AUNT SALLY hurries toward her.*)

AUNT SALLY

Nancy! You're too weak—

KATE (*contemptuously*)

You don't need to be afraid for me, Nancy. I meant every word I said, but I'm like the rest of us women folks. I just talk. Talk and don't do nothing. I ain't going to let it die. If I can help it. I don't want you to lay crying for him in the night like I do sometimes.

NANCY (*half to herself*)

I was going to do so much for him! I'd been dreaming and hoping—

KATE (*wraps the child in blanket*)

I reckon you can keep on hoping for a while yet, Nan. And dreaming foolish. He don't look so bad now, does he, ma?

AUNT SALLY (*picking up child*)

No. 'Course, the danger ain't over yet. They sometimes gets them spasms quick in succession, and you can't always do anything with 'em no matter what you try. But just keep him warm—

KATE (*briskly*)

Whisky's good for convulsions—

AUNT SALLY (*reflectively*)

Whisky helps nigh most everything—snake bite and heat stroke and drowning. It won't hurt a mite to try it. (*Looking down at child.*) Well, if the heat

and rubbing ain't got him to sleep! Don't bother him with nothing now. (*Puts the bundle into NANCY's eager arms.*) Poor little lamb! Keep him good and warm and don't give him his suck for a spell—if you can help it. Of course, if he wakes and squawks for it— (*She makes a hopeless gesture.*) You just got to humor young ones when they're sick.

NANCY (*bending over child*)

Are you sure he'll get well, Aunty?

AUNT SALLY

You can't never be sure of nothing. (*Going to table.*) I'll just fix you up some gruel, and then I'll go home for a spell. If you need me again, just send over quick, and I'll do what I can.

(*She begins to prepare the gruel. KATE takes her cloak from the wall and puts it on.*)

KATE (*near door*)

Good-by, Nancy. I'll be in early to-morrow.

NANCY (*tearfully*)

I'll never get through thanking you and your mother for what you did for me to-day, Kate.

KATE (*roughly*)

Maybe some day you won't want to! (*She goes to bed.*) You had a close call that time, Nan. (*Almost tenderly for her.*) Maybe you won't never have to know how it feels to have a piece of your body buried out in the forest—and snow and rain beating on a grave that's so little you can't always find it right away. (*As NANCY shudders and hides her face, she pats her shoulder.*) Now—now—it's going to be all right, I reckon. And you can go on making believe he's going to be a prince or something big when he grows up.

NANCY (*rapt*)

I almost lost him—like Mary came nigh to losing the baby Jesus when Herod's soldiers killed all the other children. But she escaped with hers and ran off to Egypt. (*In an awe-struck whisper.*) God couldn't let my baby die either— He saved him to do great things in the world.

KATE (*laughing indulgently*)

You can thank God, if you want to, Nancy. But I think my own ma had something to do with saving that baby of yourn. (*With one of her rare looks of affection which causes AUNT SALLY to straighten up considerably for a moment.*) My ma ain't got learning, but a grannywoman like her knows a sight more about sickness than them new-fangled doctors with their medicine cases.

NANCY

I sure am grateful, Aunt Sally, and when the baby grows up, he'll thank you, too.

AUNT SALLY (*slumping again and going back to her cooking with her old air of dejection*)

I don't expect no gratitude from children. I helped bring an army of 'em in the world, and not one of 'em ever thanked me yet.

KATE (*opening door*)

Why, there's Tom coming up the road—taking his time about it after all the trouble and excitement we been having. (*Calling through open door.*) Hi there, Tom Lincoln! Can't you hurry for once in your life? You've got a boy.

AUNT SALLY (*shuffling to the door*)

I'm aching to see Tom Lincoln's grin when he sees the little fellow.

KATE (*walks back to bed*)

With all that to do, Nancy, you never got to tell me what you're aiming to call that there baby.

NANCY (*fondling child*)

I always did like the name of Abe. And I know it'll please my man, too. I'm aiming to call him after his granddaddy, Abraham Lincoln.

(1)

CURTAIN

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